



Business

Ga. jobs lesson for R.I.

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By Benjamin N. Gedan

Journal Staff Writer



C. Michael Cassidy, right, president of the Georgia Research Alliance, chats with Governor Carcieri before the start of the Rhode Island Science and Technology Advisory Council meeting yesterday.

The Providence Journal / Bill Murphy

PROVIDENCE — Georgia faced a massive budget deficit in 1990, forcing 10-percent spending cuts in most state departments. But the governor and leading lawmakers still scraped together \$15 million to start the Georgia Research Alliance, a nonprofit organization charged with expanding the state's economy by promoting scientific research.

Seventeen years later, the alliance has helped build 125 companies that together employ more than 4,000 people, C. Michael Cassidy, the president of the alliance, said yesterday in a speech in Providence.

"It's about creating opportunities," he said. "It's an investment. Too often people think about this as an expense."

Cassidy was the guest of the Rhode Island Science and Technology Advisory Council, a 13-member panel founded two years ago with a similar mission.

But Rhode Island is more than late to the party. Although he praised Governor Carcieri's efforts to replace traditional manufacturing with an "innovation economy," it was clear from Cassidy's speech that he considered this state's investments to be tiny compared with those in Georgia, even accounting for the difference in population.

The Georgia Research Alliance, Cassidy said, receives \$30 million in state financing annually. It spends \$8.25 million per year to recruit researchers and an additional \$4.7 million to support start-up companies. Nearly \$16 million in alliance funds go to upgrading research infrastructure.

By contrast, Rhode Island gives the Science and Technology Advisory Council \$1.5 million to distribute annually. That means Georgia, with nine times Rhode Island's population, provides 20 times as much money to promote the growing life-sciences sector.

Taxpayers here have also poured millions of dollars into the University of Rhode Island for research, approving \$50 million for a new biotechnology center just three years ago.

Another publicly financed effort, the Slater Technology Fund, gives out \$3 million per year in venture capital to local start-ups.

One of the 32 researchers who was awarded a grant last year from the Science and Technology Advisory Council — Rhode Island College Prof. Eric Hall — has just received \$1.46 million from the National Institutes of Health to promote research that he and other scientists, including at least one at Brown University, are doing into treatments for testicular cancer.

The proposals for the program's second year were submitted Sept. 24. "We're off to a good start building what I call collaboration muscle," Saul Kaplan, executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, said yesterday.

"In this kind of business, it's a longer-term view you have to take," Carcieri said yesterday before Cassidy spoke. "I wish we could wave a magic wand and see results. But these things take time."

For now, however, Georgia continues to outpace Rhode Island in the amount and scope of its support for improving research at local universities and transferring discoveries to local companies.

In all, the Georgia Research Alliance has supplied \$400 million to help create technology jobs.

Relying in part on matching funds from six universities, including Emory and the Georgia Institute of Technology, researchers supported by the Georgia Research Alliance are investigating a vaccine to prevent HIV, technologies to impede computer hackers, and measures to stop the spread of avian flu, Cassidy said.

Those and other projects have attracted \$2 billion in federal and private investment since 1990, he said.

More important, he added, the alliance's VentureLab has helped researchers and "serial entrepreneurs" collaborate to commercialize the discoveries.

“We’ve grown a whole new group of companies,” Cassidy said. “We’re trying to more closely couple the whole system.”

bgedan@projo.com